



# Disability: Leadership, Resistance and Culture

## Self Advocates Against Segregation

Mabel Cooper (1944 – 2013) was institutionalised at 3 weeks old until her 30s. Upon her release (1977), Mabel became a campaigner for people with learning disabilities in Croydon People First, awarded an Honorary Degree from the Open University (2010). Mabel went to a number of children's homes, but never learned to read.

"I'm more confident since I've been in the People First group. You do what you want to do and not get anybody else to do something for you. I was chairperson. You help the people what can't do it for themselves"

"When I went to St Lawrence's at 13 in 1957, you could hear the racket. You think you're going to a madhouse. I went to A2, the admissions ward, for two weeks. They moved you on to another ward where there was all children until I was 15. Then I went to another ward with adults. There was bars on the windows and no toys whatsoever. There were lots of single sex wards. They all had about 75 people. There was no school, they only let you use your hands by making baskets and that sort of thing.. The worst thing was, you had to wear other people's clothes. You could go to a dance but you'd have men one side, women the other, dancing round the staff in the middle... In them days if you had learning difficulties that's where they used to put you.

After 20 years at St Lawrence's I asked the social worker to move out and was in various half-way houses for 8 years with my own room then with a friend. I have some friends who support me.. I think being in a (self-advocacy) group teaches you to learn to say what you want to say and not what everybody else wants you to say.. For people what's lived in the hospital for so many years, and then expect them to live on their own, it's wrong. We need support"



**Mabel Cooper**



**Jackie Downer**

called double discrimination. I've written books with my support worker about this. I created a black friendly group. I won the Black Disabled Achievers' Award. I got my MBE for services in Southwark and St. Georges. I never believed I would have a mobile phone, or my own chequebook. Linnett, my support worker, believed in me, and now I have them & independence. People with a learning disability now live a life like other people, have partners and children, that never used to happen. It's still not perfect, but things have definitely changed"

"I wanted to learn to be able to speak up for myself as a person with learning disabilities and for other disabled people. I worked at a place called Lambeth Accord where they helped me to become a self-advocate. It would be nice if people changed their attitude towards us".

Jackie Downer fights for people to be treated equally. She is Managing Director of Thea, The Quality Company, who assess the quality of support people with a learning disability receive.

"It's about when you see people treated in a different way. We get discriminated against. Everyone's got a right to be who they are. I went to a special school – my friends from there are still in a day centre. I have a job. I do it because people believe in me. I don't want bad things to happen to people with a learning disability. I interviewed a group of people with complex disabilities that got a job, and some of them are still here years later. People are doing things for themselves. They've got real jobs and wages. When you're black and you've got a learning disability, it's

